

God's Amazing Love

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

Written By: Pastor John T. Anderson

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Question: What does this collared shirt have to do with the Gospel and God's love? This is the question we will explore in our study today. The unfathomable, unexplainable, infinite and unconditional love of God! Who can describe it? With what words can it be conveyed? What mortal language is adequate; what human pen is sufficient to tell the wonders of His amazing love? That He would take pity on poor, helpless sinners and save them is beyond explanation. Repeat this beautiful verse with me, won't you? "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life." John 3:16.

Some of the ideas I'm sharing with you today come from a wonderful book written by Thomas Davis entitled Was Jesus Really Like Us? Here are some things to consider: How could God, the One Who is the very essence of life, give up life and die for sin? After all, divinity, by definition, can't die. The answer is that according to His wonderful plan, which was planted in God's mind long before sin entered the picture, He would be born into the human family and become a member of the human race. While on this earth His divinity would be "hidden" and not used for His own purposes. He would still be fully God, for a divine Sacrifice was required, but this divinity wouldn't be seen or used for His own needs.

The plan that God devised to save fallen man was daring and risky. If Christ failed to live a perfect life of obedience, all would be lost. There was no "savior" for the Savior. If He made one slip, one mistake, the devil would seize upon this as evidence that he was right in charging that God's law was impossible to obey. There was very real risk involved in this endeavor. It wasn't a mirage; it wasn't just make believe. The penalty attached to sin was severe. It was death; not just the death that all experience now, which the Bible calls "sleep," but eternal death; the realization of being lost forever, of being abandoned and rejected by God. This penalty Jesus, the God through Whom all things came to be, proposed to take upon Himself. He would ransom mankind and pay the price for redemption. Beyond that, He would show that the devil's charges, that God was not fit to rule and that His law was not capable of being kept, were without foundation. He would come and live as a Man and demonstrate that sin was not inevitable; that obedience was possible even in fallen human nature! What condescension! What risk! What jeopardy! What devotion! What love!

So it was that about 2,000 years ago Jesus Christ was born of Mary by the Holy Spirit. "Then Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I do not know a man?' And the angel answered and said

to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One Who is to be born will be called the Son of God.'" Luke 1:34, 35.

Let us notice carefully what the proposition was and what it was not. Let us be aware exactly what the plan of salvation anticipated would take place when Jesus came to earth. With what "fallen human nature" would Christ come? Notice carefully a distinction. Jesus would come in the nature of fallen man, but it was not the nature of unregenerate fallen man. It was not the nature of someone who is unconverted and obeys without question or hesitation the desires and lusts of his flesh. No, Jesus would come in the nature of regenerated, converted man. In other words, Jesus was born, "born again." It was indeed "fallen human nature," but a nature similar to one who is reborn. When we're converted, we still live in "fallen human nature," but with a new Power within.

How do we know that's true? Pay careful attention to the word "brethren" as it appears in Hebrews chapter 2. Notice how it identifies the nature with which Jesus was born. "For both He Who sanctifies (it's speaking of Jesus here) and those who are being sanctified (ones who are converted or born again) are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying: 'I will declare Your name to My brethren; in the midst of the congregation I will sing praise to You.'" And again: 'I will put My trust in Him.' And again: 'Here am I and the children whom God has given Me.' Inasmuch then as the children (of faith) have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. For indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham. Therefore in all things He had to be made like His brethren (the children of promise, the seed of Abraham) that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God." Hebrews 2:11-17.

Who are Christ's "brethren"? Let us ask Jesus Himself. "While He was still talking to the multitudes, behold, His mother and brothers stood outside, seeking to speak with Him. Then one said to Him, 'Look, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, seeking to speak with You.' But He answered and said to the one who told Him, 'Who is My mother and who are My brothers?' And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, 'Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother.'" Mathew 12:46-50. Who are the "brethren" with whom He shares the same nature? Is it the unconverted? No. It is those who have been changed and now do "the will of God." It is those who are the "seed of Abraham," that is, the children of faith. This cannot refer to a person who is living in an unregenerate condition, still living within and being controlled by the nature of carnal flesh.

Going back to Hebrews 2:11, we see that the text is speaking of those who are "being sanctified." "For both He Who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren." The nature that is shared between Christ and fallen humanity is that which belongs to those who are "being sanctified." Of what is it speaking when it says that they are "of one"? "For both He Who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are

all of one.” “Of one” what? Since there is no noun to explain what “one” represents, may we suggest that the most reasonable term within the context is the word “parentage.” It is when there is common parentage that the word “brothers” applies, right? The common Parentage of which this is speaking is not in the literal sense (that was the mistake of the people Jesus answered in Matthew 12), but in the spiritual sense. Specifically, it is referring to the common Parentage of the Holy Spirit Who brought about the birth of Jesus and Who brings about the birth of the Christian.

Think of it this way. Before we were born again, the Bible describes us as being dead in sin and children of wrath. “And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.” Ephesians 2:1-3. Paul then goes on to describe how grace came into our lives and brought change. Those three verses do not describe the “fallen human nature” that Christ was born with. That would be impossible.

Before we were reborn, we were without strength, ungodly, carnally minded and finding it impossible to obey God. “For when we were still without strength, in due time (at the precise right time according to prophecy) Christ died for the ungodly. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” Romans 5:6; 8:6-8. This is not the fallen human nature that Jesus took upon Himself. In other places the Bible speaks of the unconverted as being children of the devil and children of darkness. Those terms could never apply to Jesus, though He was accused falsely with such language. He was born “re-born.”

Why does the passage in Hebrews 2 include the quote, “I will put My trust in Him”? This is very important. It’s telling us that Jesus lived here by faith. That’s the force of the word “trust” in the text. The pronoun “I” is to be emphasized. Jesus, though very God, didn’t use His divine power to wage conflict against the devil. He had to rely on God’s strength and power just like we do. How amazing that the omnipotent God would place Himself in a position in which He had to rely on Someone else! That’s how He is “one” with us. Without putting His trust in Him, without exercising faith in His Father, Christ would have failed. The same way that we have to put our trust in Him for victory is the same way that He put His trust in Him.

When the angel Gabriel came to Mary to inform her of the miraculous birth she would experience, he described the infant Jesus as “that holy One” and the “Son of God.” Luke 1:35. We can become “holy” and we can become “children of God,” but only after receiving Christ, after being born again. We were not born with that new nature. Christ was. Christ was not like other babies. He was holy from birth. Do you see the difference? Mary and Joseph marveled at the exhibition of right principles demonstrated in the unique Child Jesus. He accepted the physical liabilities that came through 4,000 years of degeneration, but His mind was pure and holy. He had no disposition toward sin, no propensities or leanings toward evil.

But if that's true, someone might ask, then how can it be fair? How can He be our Example? That's not the way you or I came into the world. It is absolutely fair because God offers to each one of us the Gift of new life through conversion. He does not blame us that we were born evil minded. But He offers a solution. When we are truly born again, really converted, we are given a new mind, a new way of thinking, new impulses, new inclinations and a new nature. Notice the promise of new life when one receives Christ. "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name: who were born (re-born), not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, but of God." John 1:12, 13. This text makes it clear that when we exercise the gift of faith and "believe," our status is changed from being children of "wrath" to being "children of God." By this process we then become "brethren" of Christ, sharing the same Parentage, the Holy Spirit.

Peter tells us that "as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust." II Peter 1:3, 4. At the point when we are born of God and share the common Parentage of the Holy Spirit by which Christ was born, we become sharers, partakers of the divine nature.

Paul tells us that, "If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." II Corinthians 5:17. This is accomplished by the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit Who gives us the new birth experience. This changes everything! We are then put in an advantageous position. In this sense we are partakers of the divine nature. In this sense we can overcome as Christ overcame. Jesus did not use His divinity to overcome the devil in the conflict of life. He had to exercise faith in His Father for victory. He used only those tools available to any sincere seeker of righteousness; the Word of God, the power of the Holy Spirit and the ministration of holy angels. All of these are given to the new born Christian, with which successful battle against sin may be waged.

We need to exercise caution when we speak of Christ being "exactly, precisely as we are." From birth Christ had no propensity (disposition, or leaning) toward sin, no built-up backlog of bad habits, and in this sense He was different than us. But it is also true that through the immeasurable power of the Gospel, through our re-birth we need not retain any sinful propensity toward sin. God can and will "subdue our iniquities" and replace bad habits with righteous ones, putting us on a similar footing as Christ. Through Christ we can do all things. Philippians 4:13.

This is not possible before conversion, but when a person completely surrenders to God, the new nature begins to grow and predominate. Herein there is another slight difference between our experience and the blessed Lord. For us the new birth experience that brings sanctification is a process; a growing process. For Him it was a lifelong uninterrupted fact from birth. When we say He was born "born again," it doesn't in anyway imply that He had a conversion experience in which He had sins to repent of and that He required a restoration. His mind was holy from birth. Ours was not. But let none be discouraged in this! At all times when we are in Christ we are covered by His robe of righteousness. God's incredible love keeps us by grace; not excusing sin,

but recognizing that growth for the Christian is a work in progress. But new thinking and new principles will be implanted in the life of one born again!

The Bible gives us a picture of this at which we will look, a visual “show and tell” that can help us see what this means. The sanctuary was God’s teaching tool of salvation. In it, every part spoke of Christ and His glory. Notice this passage near the end of the book of Exodus. There’s a beautiful illustration in it. “He made the robe of the ephod of woven work, all of blue. And there was an opening in the middle of the robe, like the opening in a coat of mail, with a woven binding all around the opening, so that it would not tear.” Exodus 39:22.

The high priest’s robe was stitched around neck with special reinforcement to avoid its being torn or ripped. If you look at a typical t-shirt, you will see that there is a border around the neck, strategically placed so that through this additional strength it won’t be ripped or torn. When you find yourself using certain pages that are punched to go into a three-ring binder, you might place a reinforcing sticker over the hole, to avoid it tearing. The neckline of the priest’s ephod was given extra reinforcement, like a coat of chain mail, to make it difficult to tear. The Gospel is in this verse! The Good News of God’s salvation is woven into that extra stitching around the neck of the ephod! It contains a very important symbolic lesson. Let’s briefly go through the components of this verse and see the beautiful message God wants us to learn. The Bible will help us understand every part of this portrayal.

The priest represented Jesus, our High Priest. Paul wrote, “Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected.” Hebrews 8:1, 2. That Priest, of course, is Jesus. In a secondary sense, we as members of the priesthood of all believers, are also called to wear the ephod by faith. What does the robe, the blue ephod represent? In the Bible, clothing represents moral condition. Pure and clean robes represent a condition of righteousness; filthy rags or nakedness represent moral corruption. In the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve were clothed with a beautiful robe of light, made in the image of their Creator. Psalm 104:2. But through sin they realized their nakedness and attempted to construct clothing of fig leaves.

In the blue ephod we see the perfect righteousness of Jesus.

Why was the robe *blue*? Because in the Bible blue is symbolic of God’s law. How do we know that? Look at these few texts. At the time when the Ten Commandments, God’s holy law, were given, we read, “Then Moses went up, also Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and they saw the God of Israel. And there was under His feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone, and it was like the very heavens in its clarity.” Exodus 24:9, 10. Sapphire stone is blue. When the law was given, Moses and his companions saw the “foundation” as it were a beautiful blue sapphire, like the blue of the sky. That’s because His holy law is the foundation of His government.

Secondly, the people of Israel were instructed to put a blue hem or tassel on their clothing to remind them to obey His law. "Speak to the children of Israel: Tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a blue thread in the tassels of the corners. And you shall have the tassel, that you may look upon it and remember all the commandments of the LORD and do them." Numbers 15:38, 39. Blue is the royal color of God's holy law.

It was a blue robe that the priest wore which was not to be torn, representing the law of God which was not to be broken by Christ (the primary application of the High Priest) or His followers (being part of the priesthood of all believers). It was the devil's purpose to get Christ to break God's law, to tear the robe of righteousness. In that the devil failed. It has been the devil's intent to remove from God's people the clothing of His righteousness through disobedience. In Eden, after sin, the robe of light was lost. We're told of certain sons of Sceva who attempted to cast out demons. "And the evil spirit answered and said, 'Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?' Then the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, overpowered them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded." Acts 19:16. In the story of the healed demoniac of Gadara we find that he "wore no clothes." Luke 8:27. The True Witness tells the church of Laodicea that she is "wretched, blind and naked." Revelation 3:17.

Here's the point: for the priest to rip or tear that blue robe would symbolize Christ breaking the law. If Jesus had sinned, that would have been the end of the God's miraculous plan of salvation. That's why special instruction was given that the high priest should not tear his clothes. "And he who is the high priest among his brethren, on whose head the anointing oil was poured and who is consecrated to wear the garments, shall not uncover his head nor tear his clothes." Leviticus 21:10. That's why what happened at Christ's trial was so incongruous, so ironic, such a misrepresentation of what was true. After Jesus responded to their question by saying He was the Christ, what did the high priest do? In direct violation of God's Word "then the high priest tore his clothes saying, 'He has spoken blasphemy!'" Matthew 26:65. Do you see how "backwards" this was? The high priest was wrong. Jesus did not commit blasphemy by affirming He was the Messiah! The high priest committed blasphemy by tearing his garments! Keeping the symbolism and typology intact, Christ's own seamless garment was not torn. John 19:24.

When we were born, we had a disposition to sin. When we are re-born, we become in a limited sense "priests," and we "put on" the blue ephod with the stitched reinforcement, one which is not easy to tear or rip. By the new birth process, we share in Christ's holy nature. What David wrote in the 40th Psalm becomes true for us also, as it was true of Christ. "I delight to do Thy will, O my God, and Your law is within my heart." Psalm 40:8. When we are converted, the Holy Spirit begins the stitching process, reinforcing the robe of His righteousness so it won't be torn by disobedience. It becomes our delight to obey; it becomes abhorrent to sin. We echo the reply of Joseph when he was tempted, saying, "How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God." Genesis 39:9. For the converted Christian to sin would go "against nature;" that is the re-born nature. It would be like trying to tear the reinforced binding of the neck opening of the high priest's robe. Do you have the robe with the stitched reinforcement on today?

We have a dear friend who shared this story with us last week. It seems that she and another friend had shared an interest in a certain television show, "Dancing With the Stars." It was their habit, though they were separated by a great distance, to watch the program "together," that is, they would call each other frequently during the show to discuss what was happening. So it was last week that our friend's telephone rang, with her friend on the other end of the line. "Did you see that?" she asked. It took a few seconds for our friend to process both the question and its profound significance. Her friend was referring to something that had happened during the TV show. But our friend had been undergoing a change in interests, especially in the area of television watching. As it happened, the time for that show came and went, and she didn't even think about it. When her friend called, it jolted her to the reality that she hadn't even missed the show at all. A new principle was at work in her life, with new interests and desires. The principle of leaning toward righteousness and away from sin was at work in her life. Has this happened in your life?

To put it in the context of our passage from Exodus, the Holy Spirit was stitching reinforcement around the neck of her robe. The Holy Spirit was making obedience easier, and transgression harder. It would have required a conscious decision to go against the new set of principles in her life to watch that show. Christ's divine nature was taking root in her life. He will do this for all of us. He knows our trials, our temptations. He came here and lived a very real life in fallen human nature; not the nature we were born with, but the same nature as you and me when we receive the Gospel and are born of the Spirit. At that point we become His "brethren," and are of one Parentage. The same tools available to Him are available to us to use in overcoming the devil; the Holy Spirit, the Word of God and the ministration of holy angels.

God's love for us cannot be measured. He has provided all that we need to receive and experience salvation. He has promised that if we will but surrender our will to Him and allow Him access to our lives, He will bring about a work of transformation that will disappoint the devil, amaze the angels and shock ourselves. He will perform and complete this work until the day of Jesus Christ. Then throughout eternity new vistas of God's grace, new revelations of His love will be unfolding before our wondering minds as we continue to grow and appreciate His great heart of devotion.